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AUTHOR Lordan, Edward J.
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ABSTRACT

From plans to rescue EuroDisney to blueprints for introducing the Intel chip, group projects in a public relations class can offer students invaluable lessons in real-world applications. This paper provides teachers of undergraduate, introductory classes in public relations with a primer on how to develop, supervise, and evaluate group projects in public relations classes. The importance of creating projects with real-world applications that focus on the use of both technical and managerial solutions to current public relations problems is stressed. Group projects can be extremely valuable tools for teachers of public relations because they provide a variety of important lessons for students. For the projects to succeed, however, the teacher must work diligently to set legitimate goals, assist in a managerial capacity, and provide critical analysis of the various phases in the students' efforts. The paper is a primer designed as a nuts-and-bolts reference guide, although it includes some theory discussion. (Contains 8 references.) (Author/CR)

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BUILDING A BRIDGE TO THE BUSINESS WORLD: A GUIDE TO DESIGNING GROUP PROJECTS FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS COURSES

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Submitted by
Edward J. Lordan, Ph.D.
Department of Communication Arts
Villanova University
Villanova, Pennsylvania

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BUILDING A BRIDGE TO THE BUSINESS WORLD: A GUIDE TO DESIGNING GROUP PROJECTS FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS COURSES

From plans to rescue EuroDisney to blueprints for introducing a the Intel chip, group projects in a public relations class can offer students invaluable lessons in real-world applications.

The purpose of this paper is to provide teachers of undergraduate, introductory courses in public relations with a primer on how to develop, supervise, and evaluate group projects in public relations classes. The paper stresses the importance of creating projects with real-world applications that focus on the use of both technical and managerial solutions to current public relations problems.

Group projects can be extremely valuable tools for teachers of public relations, because they provide a variety of important lessons for students. In order for the projects to succeed, however, the teacher must work diligently to set legitimate goals, assist in a managerial capacity, and provide critical analysis of the various phases in the student's efforts.

This primer is designed as a nuts-and-bolts reference guide, although it includes some theory discussion. The author invites readers to provide any feedback or ideas on how to improve the use of group projects in teaching public relations; he can be contacted through the Department of Communication Arts at Villanova University, Villanova, Pennsylvania.

Introduction

This paper is designed as a primer to help teachers in undergraduate public relations courses develop group projects that help students apply textbook lessons to real-world situations. It includes both theoretical and practical information on the educational goals of these projects.

The paper is divided into nine sections: a review of the literature; an explanation of, and justification for, group projects; a discussion of the timing of the projects; topic selection; an overview of information included in the assignment; a discussion of the pros and cons of various criteria for dividing students into groups; ideas on supervising the project; evaluation criteria, and concluding remarks.

I Literature Review

The growth in public relations classes in American universities has led to significant soul searching about the origins, status, and objectives of this area of study. Because public relations draws from many disciplines and requires a range of skills, it has been associated with a myriad of other academic areas: marketing, advertising, journalism, mass media studies, organizational communications, business, even sociology.

Grunig (1989) provided an extensive review of the evolution of public relations instruction in America, arguing that the thoroughness of the program design (along with the qualifications

and resources of the teachers) in a school make a difference in the student's understanding of the public relations process. "Specialized education in public relations makes it more likely that practitioners will perform in a sophisticated and professional manner,"[1] he noted.

Grunig also distinguished between the technical skills associated with the introductory level of public relations and the managerial level associated with higher-level public relations: "Technicians are found in all organizations with public relations departments. Departments cannot be described as 'excellent', however, unless they also employ managers to supervise the work of technicians."[2] The distinction between the two levels of expertise is useful when designing the group project: Helping students to develop skills on both levels requires a balance in determining the goals of the assignment.

Grunig's reviews of public relations models (1989, 1990) are also helpful in developing the objectives of the project. He argued that a two-way asymmetrical model is preferable to simple press agentry but falls short of the more sophisticated two-way symmetrical model. Grunig provides an ethical framework for the differences between the asymmetrical and symmetrical models, considering the former to be based on manipulation and the latter to be more along the lines of conflict resolution. Whether this

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[1] Grunig, James E. "Teaching Public Relations in the Future" Public Relations Review Volume 15, No. 1 (Spring, 1989) pg. 14.

[2] Grunig, op cit, pg. 18.

distinction is valid is debatable, but regardless, it is possible to develop group projects that force students to deal with either model. For example, projects that set up a "contest" between two or more groups hoping to obtain the same end result (winning a contract or election, gaining government support, etc.) create a natural asymmetric environment. Projects that make it possible for two or more groups achieving their objectives without doing so at the expense of their fellow students creates a natural symmetrical environment.

Because one of the primary goals of the group project is to prepare students for the business of public relations, it is important to consider how the industry views the educational process. Scribner (1993) urged the business community to assist in shaping the body of knowledge for public relations students. White (1993) echoed this sentiment, calling for a partnership between business and academe to produce a curriculum that would improve the preparation of students for the work world.

Such preparation includes Grunig's technical and managerial development, but also training on ethical judgements as well. Gibson (1993) identified a series of outcomes anticipated from public relations education, including attitudes, skill levels, the value of professional affiliation experience, and presentation skills. Ritchie (1993) focused not so much on technical skills as on the value system that the educational process fosters, emphasizing the need to produce graduates equipped with a well-constructed value system who can work to reduce greed and

corruption in the system. Church (1993) and Haberstroh (1994) noted the need for skills development in specific areas of the process: Church emphasizes the further development of research and measurement skills, and Haberstroh revisits the greatest lament of both teachers and professionals in public relations - the lack of good writing skills among recent graduates.

Both academicians and business professionals consider a wide range of technical, managerial, and ethical issues when listing the goals of public relations education. The group project may not extend the development of all students in all of these areas, but it is an extremely valuable resource tool for exploring the possibilities in each of them. The technical skills needed to write a first-rate press release, the managerial decisions needed to develop a long-range plan for reinforcing a key message, the ethical debate spurred by a question of whether, when, or how to take on a questionable client -- all of these are part of the challenge and rewards when students are confronted with a creative, demanding group project.

II The Value of Group Projects in Public Relations

Group projects can help public relations students grow both personally and professionally. This growth comes from developing projects that include both a written component (the proposal) and a verbal component (the presentation of the proposal).

From the personal standpoint, such projects provide an

opportunity for students to work in a team atmosphere, relying on their colleagues and contributing to a group effort. Because they are working toward a common goal and receiving a group grade, students are placed in a position where they must learn to refine interpersonal skills, identify and overcome interpersonal obstacles, improve their listening and reasoning skills, and, in the end, come to terms with the demonstrated rewards or punishments for their efforts. Whether confronting the frustration of dealing with a recalcitrant colleague or celebrating a high grade for a project well done, students who participate in well-organized group projects learn valuable lessons about depending on, supporting and, ultimately, failing or succeeding based on a team effort. These qualities can help enhance the value system that Ritchie considers critical to the success of the public relations practitioner.

From the professional standpoint, group projects are an excellent way to simulate the conditions students will face when they enter the marketplace. Most agencies employ teams of employees to work on public relations accounts, a structure similar to the group design. These teams are required to apportion workloads, meet deadlines, seek new clients while maintaining existing ones, conduct independent research, harness creative energy, sell new business and, basically, run a business. These are many of the skills Gibson calls for in his discussion of educational outcomes. Furthermore, by using the guidelines discussed in Section V, teachers create situations in which students can interact with professionals in the field, breaking away from the campus

atmosphere and experiencing the work world with older, more-experienced practitioners. At a minimum, these experiences can provide practical advice, an additional line for a resume or talking points for future interviews. At best, they can lead to internships or employment.

The group project also encourages students to develop two critical communication skills: writing and public speaking. The development of a full proposal requires significant research, writing and editing, as the students synthesize their varied writing styles into a single document. The presentation of the project involves all of the steps required in professional public speaking, including significant preparation, organization, and rehearsal. In the end, the students are required to present a classic persuasive argument, because they are attempting to persuade a client to hire their organization.

III When To You Use A Group Project

It is possible to include two group projects in a twelve- or fourteen-week term. In general, the first project is weighted slightly less and graded slightly more leniently than the second project, because the students will have learned less about the public relations process early in the term.

In an average term, the first project can be distributed at the end of the first month, with a due date near the end of the second month. One month of preparation before the first project is

introduced is necessary to familiarize students with basic concepts in public relations, demonstrate the significance of research, and provide them with enough examples of public relations in action to help them understand the relationship between techniques and anticipated outcomes.

Depending on the success of the first project, students have varying degrees of enthusiasm toward the second one. In an ideal world, it would be helpful to give students a week or two "breathing period" between the conclusion of the first project and the introduction of the second one. However, two factors work against this approach. First, teachers are restricted by the length of the term. Second, "breathing periods" are pretty rare in the public relations business, so a quick turnaround reflects work conditions in the profession. If the students have done well in the first project and appear to be enthusiastic, it's possible to give them the second project on the same day they get back the grades on the first project. If the students have done poorly and appear overwrought by the experience, letting the introduction of the next project go for a class or two is recommended.

IV Selecting the Project Topic

Public relations teachers tend to be news-oriented people, constantly on the prowl for new ideas, strange stories, and interesting examples of public relations. This permanent "alert status" is ideal for identifying group project topics.

Some successful group projects may focus on one-time activities, such as the Olympics in a particular year, the opening of a new stadium, the campaign of a particular candidate, or the introduction of a major product (New Coke, Windows '95, etc.). These projects work extremely well at helping students understand the need to be detail-oriented and deal with the pressure that comes with one-shot deals. Such projects also offer an extra level of excitement when the actual event occurs: Students often go to see how the professionals conduct their campaign, and find out whether any of their ideas were similar to the real final product. When they find similarities, students often make the connection between their work and the work of professionals: They can envision, often for the first time, that they can do this job.

Other group projects may focus on long-term institutions, such as museums, government buildings or programs, festivals, cities and states, or even the university itself. These programs work extremely well at helping students appreciate long-term strategy and strategic planning. Because the emphasis is in these projects is over a greater period of time, students focus more on audience analysis, themes, and the establishment and maintenance of media relations.

There are distinct advantages to focusing the projects on local events and institutions. This allows students to go on site to examine the environment and conduct personal interviews with the principles involved in the project. It also gets students off the campus and into a real work environment, forcing them to do the

kinds of things they'll be doing in the work world: taking the train into the city; meeting with strangers to get background information; conducting surveys of audiences, etc. Local projects are not a necessity, however, because students now have enough methods for collecting information that they can conduct significant research without leaving their dormitories: 800 numbers, on-line programs, etc., all can be of assistance.

Topics for group projects can be positive or negative, with students learning significant lessons from each. Obviously, the opening of a new theme park or the introduction of a new product can generate a lot of energy for students. These students often need to be reminded that, even when one is generating fun ideas for audiences, it is serious and detail-oriented work for the agency. On the other hand, students dealing with institutions or issues with negative connotations (the Internal Revenue Service, a plant closing, etc.) need to adjust their thinking very early to understand the perspectives of their audiences.

Topics can also range from the mundane to the truly bizarre. It is a significant challenge to develop an exciting public relations program for run-of-the-mill products (toilet tissue, linoleum, poultry, etc.), but such tasks push the limits of creativity and demonstrate to students that these products also need campaigns. At the same time, it's a different kind of challenge to develop public relations for obscure or off-beat topics. Students have been challenged by such topics as a bug museum, a massive three-story hotel shaped like an elephant, and a

museum of medical oddities.

A variety of sources provide excellent ideas for project topics. News stories, telephone books, travel guides, city and state directories, encyclopedias and Internet sites all offer a wealth of ideas. Projects may also focus on activities that are going on around campus -- assisting campus groups, Greek organizations, etc. -- although the advantages of working with area professionals are minimized with such a choice.

Topics that have produced exciting and successful learning experiences include the Susan B. Anthony dollar, Izzy the Olympic mascot, Waco, Texas, and difficulties of the Ford Pinto. Teachers who are constantly on the lookout for new group project topics will find a wealth of options, each offering a unique set of educational advantages to their students.

V What To Include in the Assignment

The format of the assignment is normally along the lines of a request for proposal (RFP) and should reflect the kind of information that an organization would be expected to provide to an agency that is bidding on the public relations contract. It should include such basics as the name of the institution or event; the length of time to be covered by the public relations campaign (single event, one-year plan, etc.); the due date for the proposal; a brief description of the anticipated presentation; and brief guidelines for the proposal.

The due date for all of the class's proposals should be the

same, regardless of the schedule for the presentations, to be fair to all groups. Normally, presentations begin on the day that the proposals are due and continue through regular class periods until all are completed.

The description of the presentation can be limited to the amount of time, the type of audio-visual equipment available, and an invitation to be creative in the selling process. A one-hour class can accommodate two half-hour presentations, including a brief question-and answer period. The description should also state that all students in the group must have speaking parts during the presentation. However, it really shouldn't go beyond that, so that the students can be as creative as possible in the presentation.

The description of the proposal should also be limited so that students can come up with their own format for selling their ideas. Page limits, outlines, and advice on other particulars tend to restrict creativity. In general, it's better to provide too little rather than too much direction in the assignment and allow students to approach the teacher about additional guidance as the project progresses.

Regardless of the topic for the group, three points must be stressed in the assignment. The first is that research is the starting point for the project and must be completed before planning and implementation can begin. The second is that research from outside sources (such as the institution itself) can take time to collect and should be started immediately.

The third, and probably most important, point is that the goal

of the project is not to report on the institution or event, but to develop a public relations plan for it. It is very common for students to become so engrossed in the research that they fail to develop sufficient recommendations on what action should be taken. Research is a necessary component of the project but is only a prerequisite in determining how to promote the institution or event. When students go wrong on group projects in public relations, it is usually when they turn the project into a report about the institution. A warning on this pitfall should be stated clearly in the assignment and should be repeated regularly throughout the duration of the work.

VI Dividing the Class Into Groups

One of the most underappreciated areas of group project work is the decision on the method for dividing students into groups. Some teachers treat the task as an afterthought, simply developing groups by blocking out students as they appear alphabetically on the class roster, for example. Such inattention fails to appreciate the fact that the composition of the group is one of the most important determinants of the challenge and the success of the project.

The division of students into groups should address two areas: size and diversity.

The ideal size for a public relations group project is four students. This is large enough to cover all of the work that needs

to be done but small enough to allow the teacher (and fellow students) to monitor and evaluate the efforts of each group member. It is possible to go with three students per group, although the increase in the workload should be reflected when considering the grade. It is also possible to increase the size of the group to five or six, but this makes the logistics of getting the group together and the evaluation process more difficult. More important, once the group reaches this size, the chance that one or two students will let the others do the bulk of the work increases dramatically.

Three variables that are often considered in determining the group mix are intellectual ability, degree of motivation, and interpersonal skills. Most teachers have access to some form of quantitative data on intellectual ability (test scores, class rankings, etc.), although there is always a subjective element to this variable. The other two variables are highly subjective. Does a student work hard because she enjoys the material, or because she feels a lot of pressure from home to produce good grades? Is a student uncommunicative because he has trouble connecting with classmates, or because his mind is on his leadership responsibilities for a campus organization? Obviously, the more a teacher knows about the background of the students in the class, the greater the capacity to evaluate these variables. The extremely shy or gregarious types are obvious, but there are plenty of "Type A's" and "Type B's" who occupy the middle ground in the class. Furthermore, while there is some correlation between the three

variables, it is by no means universal. More intelligent students may feel more free to offer opinions and be further advanced in their interpersonal skills, but variations persist.

So, how do you decide on the groups? First, acknowledge that there is no one "best" way that will incorporate all the criteria. Second, recognize that each method favors some variables at the expense of others. One commonly used method is to attempt to strike a balance by including some gregarious, intelligent students with some of the shyer, slower ones. However, this tends to simply accentuate the characteristics: "Type A's" take over the workload, dictate orders, and push, "Type B's" sit back or trail behind. This also tends to bring all of the final grades into the ambiguous C+ to B+ range. A more successful approach is to put similar types, regardless of the variable used, together in groups. This rewards the hardest-working students by allowing them to all move at the same fast pace and forces the students who work the least to improve their work habits or face the consequences. Obviously, this approach leads to a greater range of final grades as well.

Creating groups of similar personality types has another interesting effect: Students who are traditionally leader-types are forced to sit back a little when surrounded by similar types, and students who tend to be more reticent are forced to step forward and take charge.

VII Supervising the Project

While different student grouping strategies provide different

advantages and disadvantages, some problems are almost inevitable. From a supervision standpoint, the teacher's response should strike the delicate balance between letting students work out their own problems and stepping in to keep them on track.

Students should be encouraged to create a timetable for themselves, backdating from the due date to establish such benchmarks as final editing, final preparation of presentation, drafts, research compilation, etc. Again, the teacher should continually stress the need to get as much research as possible before moving into the creative phase.

Occasionally, students will complain that one member of the group is pushing everyone else too hard. Far more likely, of course, is the complaint that one or more students aren't working hard enough. Of course, sometimes both complaints are made by members of the same group. The complaints usually come in private, and it is important when they occur to get specific examples of the problem (failure to show up at meetings, failure to turn in drafts, etc.) and to determine what the group or individual has done to address the problem. It is also important to have a private discussion with the student who is the subject of the complaint to determine his or her side of the story. Although the work disparity can be an immense source of frustration for students, it also provides a tremendous learning opportunity, as students are forced to decide how they will handle such situations in the professional world. Students who make positive, direct attempts to rectify the problems with their counterparts and achieve results gain

invaluable real-world experience. Students who make such attempts but still end up relying on the teacher to make changes gain slightly less experience. Students who never address the issue miss out on a major opportunity.

Providing regular class time to work on the assignment can be extremely helpful, because students are usually overly-scheduled and find it difficult to coordinate meeting times. Students should also be encouraged throughout the course of the project to meet as regularly as possible outside of class. During the in-class sessions, teachers can drop in on discussions, ask for updates, look for signs of disputes, and generally keep groups motivated, on track and on-time.

VIII Evaluating the Project

Evaluation criteria need to be devised and clearly communicated to the class prior to the beginning of the project. They can be explained in the syllabus, in the assignment, or in both documents.

Evaluation criteria include the quality of the research, the creativity demonstrated in the project, the organization of the project, and the professionalism of the project. All of these criteria can be applied to both the presentation and the proposal.

Quality of the Research Although the quality of the research is a key ingredient in the project, it is also an assumed ingredient. That is, it is necessary as the "ground floor" of the work, but is

not always apparent and easily evaluated, particularly in the presentation phase of the project. As previously discussed, it is important to reinforce to students that the project is not a report on the subject, but a proposal of public relations for the subject. Some of the questions that address the quality of research: How thoroughly does the research address the various audiences? How varied and in-depth are the sources cited? How much research is related to existing programs? How well do the students understand the existing public relations programs?

Creativity This can be one of the more difficult areas to evaluate, for a number of reasons. First, the teacher should evaluate the amount of creativity that's actually needed for the project, because it varies from subject to subject. Second, with the introduction of new computer software, some students can generate impressive visual presentations, without actually employing any particular creativity. Computer tricks should not be confused with imaginative thinking.

Organization The organization is more apparent than some of the other criteria in both the presentation and the written proposal. Some of the questions that address the organization are as follows: How clearly differentiated are the different ideas? Is there a logical progression of ideas throughout the project? How much overlap is there among sections? Are there any significant gaps between parts of the project?

Professionalism Professionalism is generally a function of preparation and can be seen as much by what goes wrong with a

project as what goes right. Some of the questions that address the professionalism: How polished are the speakers in the presentation, both physically and verbally? How well do the transitions work in the proposal? How good are the audiovisual materials that accompany the presentation?

The brief question-and-answer period after the formal presentation provides another good opportunity for evaluating professionalism. How well do students listen to the questions? How thorough are their responses? One of the important traits for a public relations professional is the ability to think quickly. How articulate is the student when his or her idea is challenged?

The criteria can be weighted, depending on the qualities the teacher finds most important. The presentation and the proposal can also be weighted. Regardless, the evaluation scheme should be communicated clearly so that the students know how to apportion their efforts.

IX Conclusion

The group project can be one of the best ways to help students improve their public relations skills and prepare for jobs in the profession. One way to take the process a step further is to require each group to deliver a copy of the project to the organization they have been researching. This can provide an opportunity for feedback and can help to further establish contacts in the industry. When possible, bringing in representatives from the industry to evaluate the presentations and proposals can have

the same positive effect.

Ultimately, when carefully designed, supervised and evaluated, the group project can be a critical tool in helping students cross the bridge from the academic environment to the business community.

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